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Tomás Sánchez on Exorbitance: Still Lives of the Tropical Landfill

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to make sense of a series of disturbing artworks that can be read as expressions of both Caribbean and global forms of environmental and geopolitical exorbitance. Cuban artist Tomás Sánchez has been thinking and unthinking landscape as a genre since the 1970s, and has painted a large number of tropical scenes that stage Caribbean nature in both stereotypical and ironic ways. His parallel series of “wastescapes” is an eccentric aspect of his work on landscape aesthetics. This essay argues that Sánchez’s depictions of large tropical landfills call for our attentive questioning as viewers, while beckoning us to locate our visual approach in non-pictorial and therefore unsettling and self-conscious ways. The essay proposes the notion of exorbitance as a visual trope in Sánchez’s work, and defines it as an enabling critical strategy that allows us to reflect on island and Caribbean environments in global terms.

What do they behold? They behold the images of themselves beholding.

Walcott, “Isla Incognita”

Islands are among those regressive spaces where the dissatisfied and the adventurous of the Earth go to experience bliss, or hell, or fluctuating doses of both. Before the vast expanses of the American subcontinents were entered into Western cartographic imaginaries, the islands of the

Atlantic were perceived as exorbitant enclaves. In the rhetoric of Atlantic colonialisms, figures of devastation and ruination go hand in hand with images of extravagant wealth, wonderment, and industrial acceleration. The abundance of gains and capital accumulation — an “embarrassment of riches” filled with “anxieties of superabundance” (Schama xi) and overflowing “rivers of gold” (Thomas) — coincides in spacetime with the vastness, remoteness, and threatening nature of tropical spaces, and their insular shorelines have been fixed in what Krista A. Thompson calls “the Caribbean picturesque” of visual representation (27). A different take on the contemporary predicament of insular and tropical representations concerns me here. In the following pages I read a series of paintings by Cuban artist Tomás Sánchez as thoughtful and impertinent renditions of Western landscape ideology.

Produced over the last three decades, these pieces are acrylic and oil on canvas, varying between 80 x 100 and 200 x 250 centimeters. Art critics have observed that Sánchez’s work “has moved in different directions, ... and includes ominous representations of environmental issues such as solid-waste pollution” (Poupeye 148); and that his “paintings continue to play a trenchant role in the ongoing dialogue on ecology and the need to preserve the fruits of natural abundance” (Sullivan 11). I argue that Sánchez’s strategic performances in these works call for our attentive questioning as viewers, while beckoning us to locate our visual approach in non-pictorial and therefore unsettling and self-conscious ways. Thus my reflections are an attempt at making sense of these disturbing artworks as expressions of Caribbean, environmental, and global forms of exorbitance.¹

On the one hand, in his long series of luxurious tropical landscapes, Sánchez has been parodying and reinscribing romantic and imperial visual traditions. On the other, he has been “covering” landscape surfaces with distressing and hyperbolic layers of garbage in his

“wastescapes”. He has evoked different originating contexts for his garbage paintings, such as the *tarecos*, or discarded objects that people would trash in Cuba in the 1980s, and a “huge trash heap” seen and photographed outside the Ibero-American University in Mexico City in 1990 (Sullivan 18). By “wastescape” I mean to conjure a semantic domain that both takes us into the notion of landscape and affords us a measure of ecocritical mobility: seascape and waterscape, cityscape, soundscape, “naturescape”, and “sexscape.” In addition, one could speak with accuracy of emanations of “landscapescapes”, or visions of and departures from traditional landscape within Sánchez’s analogical strategies.²

The principles of analogy and paradox appear simultaneously in both series, suggesting synchronicity and simultaneity within difference. I would like to argue that Sánchez’s garbage panoramas are inter-textual “force fields” that symbolize exorbitant value and colonial power — the constitutive facets of Caribbean and Atlantic experience — as contemporary stagings of longstanding visual traditions. Just as historical landscapes weave various zones into a seamless view through perspective and composition, so do Sánchez’s landfills extend and flow disturbingly and eerily in such disproportionate ways that they even seem to erase the material realities of economic borders and zones.

Sánchez has been an internationally recognized presence in Cuban artistic culture ever since his beginnings as part of the avant-garde in 1980s Havana, when his work was deemed controversial and defiant due to some of the ways it allegedly spoke against the political grain. After participating in the historical *Volumen I* group exhibition in 1981, Sánchez won the Miró prize for drawing in the same year and was granted permission to attend an exhibition of his drawings in Barcelona a year later. This prestigious award made it easier for him to travel abroad and, eventually, to leave the island permanently (Sullivan 17; Craven 105-7; Fernandes 137-8).

Sánchez has been thinking and unthinking landscape as a genre continuously since the 1970s, producing tropical and “spiritually charged” landscapes to this day (Poupeye 148).

The romantic trope of sublime elevation appears in these tropical landscapes with a twist: diminutive figures lost in meditation provide a contemplative focus that destabilizes and displaces the genealogy of European romanticism, depicting a variety of visual Orientalism that is not foreign to Latin American iconographic traditions. In an interview with Edward Sullivan, Sánchez explicitly states his closeness to the Hudson River School and to Caspar David Friedrich (Sullivan 19). One of these artists, Frederic Edwin Church, whose trips to South America have affected Latin American and Caribbean landscape painting, may have provided a popular visual palimpsest for Sánchez’s work.³ What we might call the “wastescapes series” is another matter, since these pieces are an eccentric aspect of Sánchez’s sustained interventions in landscape aesthetics and ecocritical preoccupations.

Ruined landscapes are an aspect of the ravages caused by natural disasters, which are in turn historical and material realities that constitute and undo value, memory, and consciousness. But Sánchez’s artworks do not lay cities to waste, nor do they indulge in facile “color vistas of Cuba’s tropical socialist utopia” (Dopico 454) — not directly in any case. Ana María Dopico notes in her critical reading of Cuban visuality after the end of the Cold War how a “new wave of photography exceeds the standard genres that normally replicate the third world for global consumption; its images signal an investment in Cuba as political fantasy, nostalgic commodity, and Cold War fetish” (453-4). Sánchez’s work, however, might be seen as proffering to turn its back on another form of tropical overdetermination. As Vicky Unruh writes, “as envisioned from afar during the 1990s, Havana’s dilapidated buildings also exuded nostalgic yearnings for a Cuba of ideologically variegated lost dreams” (197).⁴

Sánchez's work to date does not dwell immediately on the physical or socioeconomic ruination of Havana and other large cities in the Caribbean (New Orleans, Kingston, and Port-au-Prince could be among his subjects). Instead, he reflects on the nature of the garbage dump as *locus conclusus* and as space-machine: necropolises and ports, places where the object's journey, but not its visible and symbolic life, has come to an end. He is particularly interested in the spatiality of large landfills — hence his frequent use of high-angle, panoramic, and foreground-background compositions. Unlike the landfill in Mexico City that he quotes as an inspiration, his wastescapes often reach the shorelines of otherwise isolated areas. And while these garbage scenarios do not enter into direct visual dialogue with the city, they declare the city's presence through the overwhelming accumulation of its indexes. We see “ruined” landscapes because the wastescapes are overdetermined through their semantic correlation and analogy with the series of “pure” tropical landscapes.⁵

Yet while we do not usually see cities and urban ruins, we witness the results of permanent depletion — a kind of excoriation of material life that exhausts cities and megalopolises indirectly and insidiously. From an ecocritical point of view, this ruination of tropical landscape suggests an overreach and catastrophic dissemination of human waste well beyond the boundaries of urban spaces. The singularly human face of material consumption and obsolescence bids the artist and his viewers to reflect on the notions of global expenditure, inadequate recycling, and environmental devastation (Figure 1).



Figure 1, Tomás Sánchez, *Espejismo (Mirage)*, 1991, 110 x 150 cm.

© Tomás Sánchez, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York

In her influential study of “defilement and hygiene” and “rituals of purity and impurity”, Mary Douglas brought an emphasis on the fear of defilement in primitive societies to bear on the modern functions of dirt and disorder, cleanliness and order, and rejection (1-3). The necessary location of dirt, and more generally of social and symbolic pollutants, is at issue in Douglas’s analyses, as well as in her efforts to theorize the placing of “matter out of place” — and therefore the structures governing “purity and danger” in modern societies. The simultaneity of the practical and symbolic processes that she describes as “systematic ordering and classification” on the one hand, and as “rejecting inappropriate elements” on the other seem to overlap in today’s postindustrial globality (44). While Sánchez’s paintings are not obvious ethnographic or social reflections on Cuban and Caribbean culture, their interest resides, as I will try to show, in their

deployments of visual strategies that are both local and dislocated. It is the suggestiveness of Caribbean forms of global visibility that makes this corpus particularly intriguing. Their visibility is applied to “waste systems” to deploy an intense spatial tropology while interpellating us, forcing us to adapt our iconographic distinctions to the demands of contemporary geopolitical and cultural synchronicity.

Judging from the garbage heaps, valleys, meadows, and wastelands extending across the Planet, a new temporality affects the system in our asymmetric present, making it difficult to bring a sense of rational order into the processes that Douglas described. Sánchez’s wastescapes allegorize these processes as the results of a “natural” disaster; only the scoria and other ejecta he depicts have not spewed out of the mouths of volcanoes, but out of the structured distribution systems of globalized capitalist consumption and unsustainable practices. In addition, his wastescapes remind us that island environments are not entirely fixed in tropicalized insularity. They also suggest that our efforts to face the simultaneity and speed of communication processes in the global spheres that we imagine increasingly as spatial totality, or as discernable sets of totalities, are fraught with a demand for appropriate critical practices and adequate visibilities. Thus Emily Apter’s reflection that “it may now be time to consider the broader implications of how to ‘think continents’” (“The Aesthetics” 22).⁶ Yet the very notion of continent, with its historical claims to epistemological preeminence and efficiency, spills onto the figured and material otherness we associate with islands and insular spaces in its broadest sense. Islands, after all, are not just remote or isolated spaces, but also conceptual vanishing points, overdetermined enclaves that provide constructions of continental stability with a consciousness of magnitude, capaciousness, and scope.

Thinking garbage through islands, as Sánchez's work invites us to do in at least one of its tangents, means thinking towards the global from the specificities of insular spaces. In their multiple historical dimensions, the islands of the tropicalized Atlantic have been repeatedly framed and engineered to function as colonial and economic outposts. In the visibility of insular landscapes, the ruins of military fortifications and regimented domains tell much of the story. Today, seaports and resorts, airports and golf courses, shopping malls and theme parks, demonstrate the overwhelming control of tourist industries that elbow social catastrophe and environmental necrosis in a range of "sun, sand, and sea" destinations, from the European territories of Guadeloupe and the Canaries to the archipelagic island nations of Cape Verde and Jamaica. These are the very foundations upon which exorbitant wealth and perennial dependence rest. As Mimi Sheller puts it, "Caribbean tourism is vested in the branding and marketing of Paradise" ("Natural Hedonism" 23).⁷ And island paradises are located in an elsewhere that is always receding, measuring differences between the here and now and the freedoms to come. Sánchez's images seem almost humorous in their excessive "branding and marketing" of tropical insularity — somewhat trapped between too much lushness on one side, and too much ruination on the other.

EXORBITANCE

The idea of exorbitance provides us with a framework for naming the disproportionate, an aberration, or an exaggeration. But exorbitance also signals excision and the irruption of loss and disorientation into the fantasy of an ordered world.⁸ Catastrophe, too, affects nature in disproportionate ways. Nature appears besieged, and side by side with prevalent ideologies of global order, imaginaries of regression, banishment, and vanishing impose themselves as natural.

Exorbitance, the excessive, or that which departs from its proper orbit, is used today as an economic and philosophical notion. But in its seventeenth-century and later usages it was often a legal and moral concept specifically tied to territorial sovereignty and wealth. Seen from the viewpoint of creolization, the historically situated notion of exorbitance expresses some of the negative dimensions of ideas of global freedom, mobility, and equality.⁹ Creolization processes and their visualities unsettle our ways of approaching space and place as a linear and unmediated progression towards the global — they are the forms of an uncircumventable exorbitance.

Imaginariness of excess in the black and creolizing Atlantic influence discourses of circulation, dependence, and excessive deviance in the Caribbean. Here, I am considering exorbitance as a visual trope, and defining it in part as an enabling critical strategy in the works of contemporary artists who reflect on insular and tropical environments in global terms. I want to suggest that creolization processes may be examined in a range of these negative and paranoid images not as instances of exorbitance, but as its constitutive scenario. Today, images of exorbitance are familiar elements in the socioeconomic landscapes, cultural realities, and aesthetic questionings of the islands of the decolonizing Atlantic and Caribbean. While issues of cultural difference and political specificity are now central aspects of how island spaces figure in the global scene, capital flows and systems of inequality homogenize these spaces, connecting them in transnational projections of shimmering cruise boats, luxurious resorts, dysfunctional labor practices, and social and environmental deterioration. Debt and default are exorbitant, if we comprehend as exorbitant that which departs from the orbits or routes set by institutions of global finance and governance (*Life and Debt*).

Sánchez's paintings are not only narratives of failing globality, of a specifically Caribbean condition, or of revolutionary politics and deadly consumerism. They are reversals of

visuality, routes taking us away from well-known narratives of Caribbean and Atlantic itineraries. They do not represent any given path, but quite the opposite. They are explorations of the limit, perhaps of the point of no return; and they are, if we are to take Sánchez's recollections as art-historical referents, visions of the present and presence, and images of an ironic *after*.¹⁰ They signal exorbitance because they go off track in their departures from aesthetic orbits. Yet they speak about islands today, though not only about Cuba and other tropical areas (Mexico, Florida, and Central America) where he has worked. Figurations of the desolate landfill of cultural and consumer debris are now the archipelagic seas threatening to flood the islands of global consumption from equatorial Africa to Florida, turning these singular panoramas into itineraries and irrigations of contemporary global space. But what do we mean by global when "globality" is suggested from Cuba, from the broader Caribbean, and from the critical and contemplative gestures that interlock in aesthetic practice?

In *Colored garbage under the storm* perspective and composition breach conventional genres and entangle the visual codes that we associate with early modern notions of still lifes and landscapes (Figure 2).



Figure 2, Tomás Sánchez, *Colored garbage under the storm*, 1991, 110 x 150 cm.

© Tomás Sánchez, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York

Here, landscape “recedes” into its historical location in pictorial composition by occupying a decorative and anecdotal margin. Early still lifes, as much as early landscapes, come to the foreground by displacing other subject matter, and many of the more panoramic still lifes are indeed structured as landscapes. They are analogical renditions on the politics of food and agricultural production and distribution, and on economic prosperity (Schneider 24-50). Set against a nocturnal curtain, thick-canopied trees extending from left to middle provide a “natural” fringe. On the lower right corner, a small bush of tiny white flowers is a delicate ornamental counterpoint to the piles of plastic bags on the foreground. Near the right margin a small white-chested bird standing atop a black garbage bag looks upwards, its diminutive gaze

suggesting a line of flight—an escape from the oppressiveness of the scene. A second mold of plastic bags stands at some distance toward the left on the sea of debris: cardboard boxes, Coca-Cola cans, and a myriad of discarded objects. A fire smokes into the distance — another contrapuntal line of flight extending sinisterly against the gloomy sky — and a cascading brightness to the right of the background curtain might indicate a studio painting, an installation such as those in the tradition of *arte povera*, staged in front of a matte photographic canvas.

A question arises out of negative representations of exuberantly “dead” landscapes, or rather a questioning imbrication of overlapping dimensions and planes: Can non-nature resemble, in a macabre game of fractal correspondences, the contours and surfaces of living nature? *Nature morte* imitates, but not “from nature” — it imitates from domestic familiarity, where immobile nature is at most a fiction of the laws of social cohesiveness. Norbert Schneider traces the history of the expression *still life* in relation to some of its competing terms, from the Dutch 17th century to the 18th century coinage of the French *nature morte*. He notes that “the Dutch word *stilleven* originally meant no more than ‘inanimate object’ or ‘immobile nature’ (*leven* or ‘model’)”, and observes a similar insistence on “immobile nature” in German and French 17th and 18th century texts (7). Through the artifices of perspective and photographic style, as evoked in these paintings, Sánchez proposes an ethical calculation, the obtuse logic of an eccentric equation: nature = landscape = ecological catastrophe = pictorial nature (*nature morte*). What defies our codes of visual responsiveness with irony, humor, or discomfort is a consciousness of the exactitude of this equation as a metaphor for ruination, or the negative correlate of the very “embarrassment of riches” to which still life and landscape traditions owe their historical genealogy. As these traditions suggest, landscapes are not just representations of the natural outdoors. They are discursive depictions of commodified space and subjective

projections that use the land as codified medium. Sánchez, then, alludes to the tradition that developed in Western Europe from what Christopher S. Wood describes as “independent landscape” (9-65). Yet in Sánchez’s wastescapes series the islands of exorbitant wealth reappear under different historical circumstances in contemporary coloniality, and their ironic description of tropical space is newly exorbitant.

Industrial proliferation and natural depletion intersect in a slight high angle composition titled *Drums* (Figure 3).



Figure 3, Tomás Sánchez, *Drums*, 1993, 200 x 250 cm.

© Tomás Sánchez, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York

Emblems of petroleum oil and hydrocarbons have been symbolically laid out in a mortuary and soteriological pose. The composition mixes the sensuousness of landscape perspective with the kinds of macabre ecological devastation that refined substances conjure in the viewer's sensorium. The three steel drums are arranged in an inverted perspective, sliding "head down" on the deepening slope and set against a saturated background of burned and oxidized debris. A piece of torn white fabric or paper hangs from one of the barrels on the left.¹¹ Staged with a certain sense of proximity or intimacy through close framing, these "drums" are presented here as objects of portraiture. Concurrently, the image confronts us with topographies of Caribbean, hemispheric, and global anxieties — narratives around the ubiquitous presence of oil-derived and oil-related objects that exceed spatial and political containment. The Atlantic-Caribbean or the Caribbean-Atlantic oil complex, which borders Western and Central Africa, South America, and the southern coasts and peninsulas of Central and North America, is the historical space of exorbitances that anchored or grounded the massive development of new regimes of commerce and transnational dependence. If, as filmmaker Stephanie Black's wit reminds us, *Life and Debt* stands for life and death as a tenuous borderline condition, the industrial cycles connecting and distancing states of freedom and freedom of states in insular spaces are also the figure of a paradoxical structure. One side or instance frames and contextualizes the other.

A TIME FOR GARBAGE

Mieke Bal summons a bundle of ironic and perhaps rather grave gestures in her account of an exhibition by another island and landscape artist, Olafur Eliasson, as "the romanticism that lingers within postmodernity" ("Light Politics" 154). Bal's perceptive observation can be

extrapolated to Cuba and the broader Caribbean with different connotations. Indeed this romanticism lingers variously, and its value, sensed and expressed from a Western enclave resonates with the meanings that “romanticism” and “postmodernity” may carry today west of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. If Sánchez is a self-styled and creolized descendant of the Dutch landscape masters, he is also a less distant relative of the Hudson School, and a self-avowed enthusiast of the romantic tradition in Western painting. But his works are also grounded on avant-garde and neo-avant-garde referents, such as expressionism and surrealism, *arte povera*, photorealism, and pop art, as well as on Latin American and other transatlantic cultures of visuality. The residual romanticism implied here is self-conscious and strategic, as it is in much cultural production from and on Latin America.¹²

The photorealist lens at work in Sánchez’s landscapes and wastescapes suggests an ironic conceptualization on what it means to create overdetermined images that alter genre conventions by mixing tropologies and codes. The “return” and detour to a genre that was never abandoned, even if it was sometimes evoked metonymically or in miniature form, is particularly interesting in this Caribbean case. Sánchez’s departure from 19th century Cuban painting, from the vanguardia painters of the 1920s and 1930s, and from the interior jungles of Wifredo Lam’s international and Afro-centric modernism, prolongs the tradition, albeit in a different direction (Fernandes 137-42). He insists on signaling how seemingly exhausted pictorial archives continue to permeate both canonical and popular visual cultures. But this insistence can also be understood as a form of interpellation that destabilizes both a spiritualist reading of the artwork as narcissistic experimentation and the primacy of a naive subtext on environmental awareness and vague ecocritical concerns.

In my opinion, Sánchez trades in the “auratic” value of traditional genres and visual codes, perhaps in an attempt to access a resilient surplus value in the face of fast-expanding new technologies and media. Furthermore, there is another form of value at play in his work: the possibility of formulating self-reflective irony and paradox with regard to the very historical codification of the chosen medium. The elevation of cheap or exorbitant media, from David Hockney’s campy Polaroids to the series of bombastic Turbine Hall installations sponsored by Unilever Corporation at the Tate Modern, proves that medium and irony expand effectively within the canonical margins of contemporary art.¹³ The wastescapes, then, are not just iterative renditions of garbage. While several of the pieces are titled *Basurero* (garbage dump), there is a shift as the series expands from the 1980s to the 2000s. Titles and contents turn increasingly humorous and ironic, and the images dialogue with various avant-garde and contemporary traditions, starting with his “expressionistic streak” (Sullivan 9). We find references to collage, as well as irreverent and iconoclastic Surrealism in the form of predictable and flamboyant tropicalizations of pictorial landscape.

Analogy is perhaps one of the most iconographically poignant images in the series: the volumes resemble the karstic formations (*mogotes*) in the Viñales valley of western Cuba, or other characteristically exotic areas in Tasmania, Venezuela, China or Vietnam (Figure 4).



Figure 4, Tomás Sánchez, *Analogy*, 2002, 80 x 100 cm.

© Tomás Sánchez, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York

We are invited to play the game of visual analogies between landscapes, but we are also meant to sense the blunt interruption of a “mountain” on the foreground in the form of a plastic garbage bag. Luscious greenery has been replaced by the surrounding wastescape containing large oil barrels, and the extended field of debris brings the immensity of the mountains into paradoxical focus. In its relative insignificance, the plastic bag is a recycled presence, a volume that stands and competes with the distant mountains, blocking the viewer’s access to the pictorially satisfying vista. The shiny surfaces of the plastic bag clash with the unsavory halo covering sky and mountains in yet another expression of visual exorbitance, induced by perspective, and brought into focus through a perverse manipulation of analogical correspondence.

Many of these wastescapes conjure a heightened awareness of our senses of smell and taste when we are faced with “impure” or polluted nature. These *natures mortes* are reminders of the toxic effects of ecological irresponsibility on a multilocal and therefore global scale. In one of the paintings, a set of “drums” (large oil containers like those used in steel drumming) once again conjures the bitter contemplation of what can and can no longer be recycled in processes of cultural refashioning and transformation. The irony suggested in this image (the oil containers occupy the foreground like the subjects in a photographic portrait) brings together the indexical sounds of island music and toxic waste wafting into the air in the fumes curtaining the background: aberrations of idyllic tropicity, dystopic soundscapes and disturbing “aromascentes.” But the displacement to an outside of the sprawling or mountainous landfill does not necessarily suggest a radical gap excising urban centers from peripheral garbage patches or “islands.” Rather, I would like to insist on reading Sánchez as a pluri-located, globally and ecologically conscious artist whose strategies far outreach local and regional concerns while encompassing and dwelling on them. Landfill areas, as in the example from Mexico City, appear often in close proximity to urban spaces, and are articulated with large urban complexes. While there is increasing pressure to displace garbage to remote areas of the Planet (a practice that is well-known in relation to nuclear and other immediately and long-term threatening categories of waste), garbage “islands” of varying dimensions exist within reach of most cities large and small worldwide.

Some of these environments have become media spectacles, due in part to the relatively large human communities that live off the various categories of garbage comprising these vast landfills. La Chureca near Managua is one of them, and Jardim Gramacho near Rio de Janeiro has been the subject of a recent documentary by Lucy Walker featuring Brazilian artist Viz

Munik and his work with landfill workers, *Waste Land* (2009). On a smaller scale, Jorge Furtado's quirky short film, *Ilha das Flores (Isle of Flowers)* (1989), about a small island that serves as tomato farm and landfill for Porto Alegre, was an international success that called attention to ethical and political issues related to the economics of garbage and food distribution. Bregtje van der Haak's *Lagos Wide and Close: An Interactive Journey into an Exploding City* (2005) follows Dutch architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas through one of the world's largest cities and the second largest in Africa. Koolhaas' interest in issues of urban systems and chaos in this film is perhaps symptomatic of a broader Western preoccupation with spaces within the Global South that are perceived as socially and environmentally "explosive."

In *Agony of true blue* garbage bags are arranged in a photorealist manner on the foreground, and accented by an optimistic half-broken, blue-and-white parasol opening up like a violet (Figure 5).



Figure 5, Tomás Sánchez, *Agony of true blue*, 1995, 200 x 250 cm.

© Tomás Sánchez, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York

On the left hand side, large painted surfaces form a winding path directing us to many pieces in Sánchez's "pure" landscape series featuring bodies of water and large clouds against bright blue skies. The self-referential pun results in an indirect quotation of René Magritte. Here, the artist's Möbius strip seems to show both sides simultaneously and almost seamlessly. The path veers toward a somewhat somber seashore — a parergon like those often used by the surrealists. Glossy primary colors contrast with the melancholy seascape in the distance. Still life and landscape composition appear in tension, with the self-referential mise en abyme offering yet another ironic turn in the series. Is the word "agony" in the title a gesture toward the location of

landscape painting within a larger allegory of environmental explosion — the exorbitant magnitude of the tropicalized still life?

What stands out in the wastescapes, if we read them not only as counterpoints to the “pure” series but also in dialogue within the same pictorial process, is an insistence on debris; and debris, as a “collection” of singularities and as a constellation of objects, still tells stories from the narrative fragments of previous material lives. The objects contained in masses of debris, in other words, can be recognized and reclassified because they convey a relationship with historical time. In a provocative essay on “imperial debris,” Ann Laura Stoler makes a crucial distinction between empire and imperial formations. The latter

are defined by racialized relations of allocations and appropriations. Unlike empires, they are processes of becoming, not fixed things. Not least they are *states of deferral* that mete out promissory notes that are not exceptions to their operation but constitutive of them: imperial guardianship, trusteeships, delayed autonomy, temporary intervention, conditional tutelage, military takeover in the name of humanitarian works, violent intervention in the name of human rights and security measures in the name of peace. (193)

Stoler’s historically nuanced understanding of “imperial formations” resonates with recent scholarship in several disciplines within Caribbean studies. And Sánchez’s work demands astute analyses and engagements that may credit Stoler’s reflections as relevant and timely for contemporary Caribbean and Atlantic studies, particularly because of her suggestion that “processes of becoming” interrupt conceptual and disciplinary totalities that free new analytical practices in the presence of cultural opaqueness: “Our interest is in the opacities that imperial formations produce between the elusive vectors of accountability and the lasting tangibilities in

which ruination operates — and on which such formations thrive” (194). From a different angle, Michaeline Crichlow and Patricia Northover insist on dynamic notions of becoming and movement through space as a path toward decolonizing/post-creolizing in Caribbean loci and diasporas. They note that “it may be useful to think of the *creolization* processes of ‘selective creation and cultural struggle’ as articulating, so to speak, a ‘politics of the cross’” (70).

Furthermore, they see such processes as “the lateral intersection of complex socio-cultural maneuvers (that is, people’s critical mimetic mo(ve)ments) with those topologies of governable space which are partially mediated through states and state-sanctioned institutions” (115).

In Sánchez’s works, the very “states of deferral” noted by Stoler, and Crichlow and Northover’s “politics of the cross” find an indexically charged discourse of territorial directionality in the geopolitics suggested by the interfacing and imbrication of tropical visual rhetoric and its deviant correlate in the garbage paintings. In many of his *basureros* Sánchez names, but also defaces, a space, a *locus*. But the distinction between organic and non-organic matter appears to be out of the way in most of the pieces — blurred, perhaps, by the very nature of stratification; or by an Archimedean logics of flotation and immersion into the decomposing depths of the dump — what Michael Thompson called “boundary forces” and “boundary stability” (224-225). What we see on the undulating skylines and rolling masses of trash are the discarded elements of our material culture: minute and substantive, meaningful and banal, hideous and moving. And the landscape is never homogeneous, resisting circumscription or adherence to a single production center, originating “mo(ve)ment,” or border.

FINIS TERRAE

The pleasurable interruption of landscape, a peripheral apparition of the countryside or of savage nature as a suggestion of exteriority is of course not the sole preserve of Caribbean or postcolonial artists. Koolhaas et al. are not alone in their observation that

Worldwide, landscape is becoming the new ideological medium, more popular, more versatile, easier to implement than architecture, capable of conveying the same signifiers but more subtly, more subliminally; it is two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional, more economical, more accommodating, infinitely more susceptible to intentional inscriptions. (1083)

I want to turn briefly to the work of Canadian artist Edward Burtynsky, another well-known practitioner of global landscape visuality who often captures contemporary landscape aesthetics from an increasing awareness of material and tropological entanglements between North and South. Landscape as “the new ideological medium” occupies the vanishing point in one of Burtynsky’s photographs from the breathtaking “Shipbreaking” series. If Sánchez’s *Agony of true blue* demonstrates the overextension of waste advancing toward a shoreline, Burtynsky’s *Shipbreaking #2, Chittagong, Bangladesh* (2000) tropicalizes space by inhibiting the viewer’s expectation of tropical landscape or exoticist scopophilia.

Despite its naming and indexical suggestiveness, *Chittagong, Bangladesh* fails to deliver the timeless illusion of “pure landscape” and aestheticized alterity. Thus, I concur with Kenneth Baker when he lucidly comments that “The ‘Shipbreaking’ pictures’ faint echo of a discredited colonialist, Orientalist vision complicates our admiration of them. The geopolitical position — and self-consciousness — of the viewer are among the pictures’ implicit references” (41). The miniaturized palm trees on the distant background are engulfed by massive oxidized structures,

parts of disassembled vessels that are embedded in a visual and sensorial discourse of globality and ecocide. Here “Landscape” is ejected, or committed to its historical genealogy as paragon, a peripheral enclave in the image’s background, while the fiction of ahistorical time is, at the same time, provocatively suspended: these oxidizing oil tankers continue to bear an indexical relationship with our shared global temporalities even as they erode and decompose amidst tropical nature by Bangladesh’s main port of Chittagong on the banks of the Karnaphuli River.

Burtynsky’s image is aligned with a transnational network of manifestos, artistic and critical practices, and collective initiatives that transcend media and location (Markonish; Pauli 132-49; Burtynsky). An indexical reading of Burtynsky’s photographs, however, falls short of the point — the problem of scale and of “Nature transformed through industry” that much of his work allegorizes and interrogates (Burtynsky). Perhaps precisely because of the attention to detail and aesthetic appeal of his photographic work, we feel compelled to see the full irony in post-industrial disposal systems as they are efficiently implemented through nature. Sánchez and Burtynsky coincide in their ecocritical interrogation of these systems’ efficiency as they are unironically marketed across the world. Their different visual strategies interpellate the structural values that we associate with a global awareness of residual matter, and of the disposal systems at work in our daily lives. But they also translate a growing consciousness of our awkward placing within the structures of interdependence in postindustrial landscapes. There is, as with garbage, a pandemic dimension to them, an implied questioning of globalization’s extensive and gyrating exorbitance.

Sánchez’s iterative landscapes compel us to rethink pictorial representation not in terms of an ideology of universal genres (landscapes and still lifes) and discourses (tropicalizations), but in terms of global visualities, across scopic regimes and transnational media in which the

Global South can be understood in its complex interrelations with multiple versions of globality. I want to continue my approach to the wastescapes series *ex orbita*, bringing in a different line of flight into the critical field by establishing a provisional dialogue between Sánchez and a Chinese contemporary artist — something like “*a will to place*, inducing a journeying from place to place” (Crichlow and Northover 18). In Beijing-based Yao Lu’s recent photographic work, landscape “grows” on and from garbage and debris, and in its “organic” relationship with the land it becomes entangled and enmeshed in topographies of waste. A press release from a 2009 exhibition of his work in a New York art gallery tells us:

Yao Lu has created a thoughtful and timely series inspired by traditional Chinese paintings entitled New Landscapes in which mounds of garbage covered in green protective nets are assembled and reworked by computer to create images of rural mountain landscapes shrouded in the mist. Lying somewhere between painting and photography, and between the past and the present, Yao Lu’s work speaks of the radical mutations affecting nature in China as it is subjected to rampant urbanization and the ecological threats that endanger the environment. (“Yao Lu”)

The text continues: “According to Lu, ‘Today China is developing dramatically and many things are under constant construction. Meanwhile many things have disappeared and continue to disappear. The rubbish dumps covered with the ‘shield’, a green netting, are a ubiquitous phenomenon in China’” (“Yao Lu”). Lu’s panoramic views build on the dynamic coincidence of what Burtynsky describes as his search for “subjects that are rich in detail and scale yet open in their meaning”. And in this ethical alloy — the allegorical bound with the symbolic, the residual melded with the exorbitant — we can situate practices and discourses that, like Sánchez’s paintings, figure location and mobility, singularity and relation, openness and the

open limits of place. As Crichlow and Northover write, “‘Modern space’ is thus situated as an unfinished genealogy of the *present* in ongoing and open political processes of transformation, transmutation, and transfiguration” (57). Conversely, Yi-Fu Tuan writes that “in traditional China the image of an ideal world, in which society conforms to the nature of things, tends to override any sense of history as cumulative change. The constant references to a Golden Age in the past are exhortations to restore harmony to the present in accordance with an idealized model” (190).

Indeed, as the gallery’s press release explains, Lu’s “New Landscapes” not only float between artistic media — they also stand uneasily “between the past and the present” of cultural and environmental perception. Lu’s barely disguised industrial nettings convey a sense of contingency. His carefully constructed renditions of Chinese landscape classics are held together by vast expanses of industrial netting, as if the entire composition were at risk of crumbling into masses of debris. Lu’s idyllic “New Landscapes” morph into metonyms for endless scaffolding as urban and industrial sprawl expand beyond any conceivable visual scope and recreate a boundless construction site. Where Sánchez’s visual tropology revels in the spreading of waste, Lu’s panoramic *trompe-l’œils* seem to concentrate on containing and reinforcing ephemeral volumes and harmonious relations. The floating islands and other promontories of the classical canon are perplexedly shored up against a vision of the scaffolded continental work zone. The dialogue between Lu’s and Sánchez’s wastescapes could not be more explicit or more graphic despite their differing emphases and geohistorical referents.

Visual tropologies of Caribbean and Atlantic insular spaces are simultaneously lodged within geopolitical regions, economic zones, and continental orbits. Yet today these spaces can also be seen as visually and culturally dislodged from geopolitical determinisms, and connected

differently from the viewpoint of a global Atlantic “perspective” that is aware of its own inter-oceanic genealogies, histories, and local/diasporic cultures. Sánchez’s garbage panoramas can resonate with distant visual grammars and iconographic traditions; they exceed the contours of tropical insularity through their eloquent reflections on the spiraling, decomposing globality of postindustrial waste. Like current semantic explorations of a grammar for the present, Sánchez’s tropical wastescapes exude the possibility of sentimental and paralyzing nostalgia. As Stoler cautions:

One task of a renewed colonial studies would be to sharpen and rethink what constitutes an effective history of the present. This would not be to settle scores of the past, to dredge up what is long gone, but to refocus our historical lens on distinctions between what is residual and tenacious, what is dominant but hard to see, and not least what is emergent in today’s imperial formations — and critically resurgent in responses to them. (211)¹⁴

Stoler’s suggestive use of the visual metonymy has important ramifications for cultural analyses of creolizing and tropicalized spaces. If by “an effective history of the present” in Atlantic contexts we are also to understand Bal’s concept of *preposterous history*, then our “historical lens” seeks to examine precisely those ways in which “what is residual and tenacious” in cultural practices is subtended by discourses that naturalize place and space as *naturally* tropical and insular — here, the underlying surfaces on which debris, garbage, and excoriation extend like second nature declare both the visual and the ideological disconnect between modern consciousness and tropical ecstasy. Surprisingly, as if commenting on Sánchez’s appropriations of landscape and still life traditions, Bal observes that

re-visions of baroque art neither collapse past and present, as in an ill-conceived presentism, nor objectify the past and bring it within our grasp, as in a problematic positivist historicism. They do, however, demonstrate a possible way of dealing with “the past today.” This reversal, which puts what came chronologically first (“pre-”) as an aftereffect behind (“post”) its later recycling, is what I would like to call a *preposterous history*. In other words, it is a way of “doing history” that carries productive uncertainties and illuminating highlights — a vision of how to re-vision the Baroque. (*Quoting Caravaggio* 6-7)

But the visual contemplation of garbage can also encompass Bal’s idea of a “preposterous history” in its obscene overreach, through its physical mechanisms of engulfing, regurgitation, and stratification. The social worlds of commodity fetishism, object identification, and discardable pleasure-toys mix and mingle in the garbage necropolis with putrescible, recyclable, and unclassifiable ejecta. And the heterogeneous humanity indexed here through a preposterous gaze remains on the surface, refusing to fully enter the realm that threatens to overextend itself permanently beyond its designated areas — only it already has, through refusal and refuse. When garbage enters and grieves the field of vision it interpellates us as spectators; it proposes itself as spectacle and mirror. The dump we see watches us with the defaced presence of past material and socioeconomic lives. It engulfs, gulps, and exhibits. The gaze it returns elicits our fears and our thirst for that other realm of human life; not the Edenic dreamworld, but the fast-receding dream of harmonious coexistence with nature that was romantically imagined for an enlightened future and went off orbit onto an unsuspected horizon of global exhaustion.

Sánchez’s garbage landscapes are shot through with an affect that connects a genuine concern for the fragility of “pure landscape” with the consciousness of an end to all natural

beauty. Yet, while the prelapsarian vision, or the renewed prospect of powerful nature, offers the utopian, or simply ahistorical fiction of a *before*, the garbage series forces us into the photorealist vision of irreversibly globalized, post-natural wastescapes. What we see in the mirror tropes of Caribbean virginity and lushness is a monstrous landscape of slow, coherent, and rational disposal. If the unnatural erosion at work in the detail of innumerable objects and parts can speak its pessimistic truth in Sánchez's wastescapes, then perhaps the fiction that tropical spaces will remain forever unhindered by civilizing and other machines no longer holds as image or as imaginary, but as foreboding and loss.

In the memorable last paragraph of his *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson reflected:

I set out posing riddles about snot and I have ended up discussing cubes filled with scrambled eggs. What, if anything, is the connection? What has rubbish theory got to do with catastrophe theory? Probably the simplest way of answering these questions is to say that in serious adult thought rubbish is an excluded monster and that, since the processes and contradictions involved in that monster are crucial to social life, its exclusion is regrettable. (228)

The repression of "tropical space" and the exclusion of wastescapes are somehow equally crucial to contemporary reflections on place and space. Today's Caribbean and Atlantic imaginaries are no longer contained by the teratological horrors of European empires, but the age when seditious cultural politics, ethnic and racial contagion, and diasporic overflow threatened to run amok in the well-tended gardens of the North is still our own. It lingers, like the visual regimes and tropologies of past centuries, in our global and increasingly creolizing present. What, we may ask, is the emerging teratology of this present globality? If garbage is a proliferating global presence, can it also cannibalize us

originators and beholders? Sánchez's exorbitant still lifes are engaged in looking at the future of landscape as these questions unfold.

Notes

¹ Reflections on the ideological and geopolitical uses of landscape are a central aspect of global artistic practices and criticism—influential artists such as Ana Mendieta, Olafur Eliasson, and Edward Burtynsky have attracted a great deal of critical interest, and they will be peripheral referents for my essay (Kastner 11-43, Halkes, and Boetzkes).

² Landfill is also echoed in *landskip*, the “original” English word for landscape, derived from the Dutch *landschap* (meaning a parergon, margin, or background). This is a geopolitically and culturally specific genealogy, since the modern notion of landscape develops in Northern Europe (Holland and Germany) and in Italy. Its context is tied to territorial dominion and capital accumulation within Dutch and Northern European capitalisms (Casey 12-14, 258-60).

³ See Howat 43-67, 75-90, and 109-32. Among many examples of the vogue of exotic Latin Americana (ancient civilizations, tropical spaces, and ruins) are travelogues published by John Lloyd Stephens in 1841 and 1843 describing his voyages to Central America, Yucatán, and Mexico (Molloy).

⁴ See in particular Unruh’s discussion of Cuban writer Antonio José Ponte’s participation in Florian Borchmeyer’s documentary film, *Havanna—die neue Kunst Ruinen zu bauen* (198-203). For related arguments informing Unruh’s essay and my own, see Dopico and Segre.

⁵ For Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, “To *tropicalize*, as we define it, means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values” (8). They also caution that “the notion of tropicity, overdetermined for the Caribbean, must be extended to embrace México, Latin America, and, in more radical and innovative ways, the United States” (1). From a different angle, José Quiroga writes of “Tropics” “as a tongue-in-cheek, ironic response to the mode in which the geographical variety of Latin America is perceived in the United States as a unanitized land of “heat,” as the *gumbo* of sensuality that meshes in some way with a world in which repression renders subjects as children, rather than discerning subjects of national polities of erratic legalities” (28). See also Michael Dash’s discussion of “tropes and tropicity” (21-42); and on the photographic dimensions of tropicity/tropicalizations in the Anglophone Caribbean, see Krista Thompson, 5-16.

⁶ For a different version of this essay, see Apter (*The Translation Zone* 193-209).

⁷ For an extended discussion on genealogies of colonialist exploitation in the Caribbean, see Sheller 2003.

⁸ Jacques Derrida in the course of his analyses of logocentrism and the supplement in Rousseau’s texts takes a step back in a characteristic moment of self-reflection in a much-discussed section called “The Exorbitant. Questions of Method” (157-64). Here, Derrida seeks to establish a sense of critical perspective with regard to “the age of logocentrism” through the deployment of a deconstructive tropology of place and movement: path, orbit, departure,

wandering, itinerary, errancy, and so on. More recently, Nahum Chandler has located Derrida's concept of exorbitance in relation to slavery.

⁹ In my shorthand for creolization I am dialoguing with Crichlow and Northover's assertion that their 'deployment of a concept of creolization does not rest methodologically upon, nor does it extrapolate any kind of reading of processes of "cultural" change through linguistic models and frameworks. Further, it does not seek to provide another overgeneralized analytic of modernity but rather seeks to *unsettle* understandings of the phenomenon derived from the matrix of the plantation' (231, n. 21). For an example of the multiple genealogies of "creole" and "creolization" extending beyond the Caribbean and its multiple plantation narratives, see Mary Louise Pratt's chapter, "Reinventing América/Reinventing Europe: Creole Self-Fashioning" (169-94).

¹⁰ Sánchez's eclectic visual rhetoric of the journey includes circular and open-ended itineraries, as well as paths seemingly leading nowhere and others leading to disaster. Mieke Bal's reactions to one of Olafur Eliasson's installations are relevant here: "In opposite ways, Eden and sublimity each foreground the near-desperate attempt to imagine and theorize humanity as distinct from nature — a distinction the concept of landscape presupposes and represses. Eden stands for an idealized state of humanity before the 'fall,' the awareness of life's limitation, its finitude. The fall into reality ... The chronology implied by 'before' is a problem of consciousness, awareness, and relationality. 'Eden' is an enclosed space of 'before,' from which humans were expelled 'after'" (2007, 160).

¹¹ Ladder segments and other reticular structures figure in many of the wastescapes, sometimes inflicting them with religious overtones. Indeed, this painting may bring to mind Andrea Mantegna's *Dead Christ* if we locate it next to Sánchez's *Hombre crucificado en el basurero* (1992). Like other Cuban artists who started working in the 1970s and '80's, Sánchez has often used Christian iconography. Antonia Eiriz and Ana Mendieta, who both influenced Sánchez early in his career, are important examples.

¹² This residual romanticism persists, like the Baroque, in various forms. The films of Werner Herzog, for example, exhibit a singularly global interest in pre-romantic and nineteenth-century visuality linking North and Central European instances (in films such as *Heart of Glass* and *Nosferatu the Vampyre*) with overt tropicalizations of Latin American spaces in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* and *Fitzcarraldo*, as well as in the string of more recent productions in which scenic views and dramatic landscapes cover the full array of enlightenment and romantic tropology: adventure, exploration, Orientalism, and so on.

¹³ See Mar Caldas's discussion of Brazilian "outsider"/global artist Arthur Bispo do Rosario in her chapter, "Arthur Bispo do Rosario: del manicomio a la Bienal de Venecia" (Rodríguez Caldas 450-531).

¹⁴ In a discussion of the "residual," "emergent, and "dominant," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak takes issue with a passage from Fredric Jameson's essay, "Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," and with the namesake book. Jameson in turn is evoking Raymond William's notions of "residual" and "emergent" (Spivak 314-15).

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